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Spartan shooters train on intermediate-range targets

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE MAREZ, Iraq – With a standard M16/A4 rifle, the average Soldier can engage targets up to 300 meters, while a skilled sniper can accurately and consistently hit targets more than 600 meters away.

It’s that “no-man’s land,” from 300 to 600 meters, that is of crucial concern to military planners and strategists.

Based upon their ability to estimate range, detect targets, and place effective, well-aimed fire on intermediate-range targets, a well-trained Squad Designated Marksman (SDM) plays a significantly, vital role on today’s battlefield.

With more than 15 checkpoints and Joint Security Stations being manned throughout the Ninewa province, the 2nd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division has an unquestionable need for such trained marksmen.

Approximately 26 Soldiers from the 2nd BCT, 3rd Inf. Div., recently gathered at FOB Marez, in Mosul, Iraq, for SDM training.

“The primary mission of the SDM, is that of a rifleman within an infantry squad,” said Staff Sgt. Jamie Peck, the brigade’s master gunner. “His duties as rifleman include

firing, maneuvering and providing support for the other members of his squad, which take precedence over his duties as SDM.

“Their secondary mission is to engage key targets from 0-500 meters, with effective, well-aimed fire, using the standard weapon system and standard ammunition. Since the SDM may not be equipped with an optical sight, he must possess a thorough understanding and mastery of the fundamentals of rifle marksmanship,” he added.

Supplementary skills, including a knowledge of ballistics, elevation and windage hold-offs, sight manipulation and range estimation, only enhance the SDM’s lethality. His abilities can also be used to help direct the fire of other squad members.

To qualify for the course, Soldiers had to meet select criteria: They had to be private through staff sergeant, so they would actually be used as a squad-designated marksmen; They had to have qualified, at the least, as a sharpshooter; and finally, they could only use iron sights or long-range sights – no M68s, or CCO’s were allowed.

The brigade’s students were already good shooters, said Staff Sgt. Peck, it was just a matter of honing those skills.

Once the class was scheduled, Staff Sgt. Peck’s real work began. It was then a matter of finding a range to support the distances they’d be shooting, finding qualified instructors, coming up with a certified curriculum from the Fort Benning, Ga., school, building 10-foot targets, finding ammunition, and finally, finding qualified students.

Staff Sergeant Peck admits the classroom instruction portion, where students learned about ballistics and zeroing, wind and weather, range estimation, moving targets, angle shooting and shooter target analysis, may have been somewhat tedious.

However, once the instruction moved to the firing range, their competitive juices began to flow.

According to 1st Lt. Samuel Freeman, a platoon leader with Bravo Battery, 1st Battalion, 9th Field Artillery, the students were exposed to a wide variety of essential skills. For example, there were shooting stances, many of which are vastly different from Army standards. Students shot from prone, standing and kneeling positions, from distances of 50 to 450 meters, and fired a sequence of rounds in less than 10-second exposures.

Students had to engage targets rapidly, with their focus on center target shots. Due to the limitations of the range, students were only able to fire at a maximum range of 450 meters.

As a five-time President's Hundred award winner and Distinguished Rifleman #1370, 1st Lt. Freeman knows his way around weaponry. Besides serving as the class' Officer-in-Charge, 1st Lt. Freeman was able to guide and mentor the 2nd BCT shooters throughout the five-day course.

"A lot of units have them, but they don't know what they are. Two years ago, I found one in our arms room. They were like, 'What do you want with that old thing?' I knew exactly what I wanted with it. I've since found three others in my battalion.

The class culminated with a shoot-off, which was won by Pfc. Jason Davis, a military policeman with the 2-3 Brigade Troops Battalion. Private First Class Davis scored 356 points out of a possible 400, placing 79 of 80 rounds into the target to take home undisputed honors.

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Shooters check their targets during the Squad Designated Marksman course, offered at FOB Marez in Mosul, Iraq. The five-day course covered subjects such as ballistics, elevation and range estimation, allowing students to hit targets from 300-500 meters. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jamie Peck)



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Students in the Squad Designated Marksman course, offered at FOB Marez in Mosul, Iraq, fire at designated targets from 400 meters away. The five-day course provided training for Soldiers to provide overwatch at checkpoints and Joint Security Stations in northern Iraq. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jamie Peck)



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A 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, Soldier takes aim at a range of 400 meters during the Squad Designated Marksman course, offered at FOB Marez, in Mosul, Iraq. Students were instructed in the finer points of consistently hitting targets at more than 300 meters away. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jamie Peck)